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ABSTRACT

In previous research, children's empathy has been positively related to guilt and unrelated to shame. In the present study, it was predicted that guilt and empathy would have a curvilinear relationship, while shame and empathy were expected to be inversely related. Participating were 115 children: somewhat less than half were ages 8-9 years, while the remainder were 11-12 years old. Children completed the Test of Self-Conscious Affect--Children's Version (Tangney, Wagner, Burggraf, Gramzow, and Fletcher, 1990) and the Empathy Continuum (Strayer, 1993). Results were found to be conditional upon children's age and sex. Guilt and empathy were negatively related in younger boys; in all other groups guilt and empathy were positively related. Shame and empathy were negatively related in younger girls, and positively related in all other groups. Results suggested that guilt and shame undergo notable change in middle childhood. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/EV)

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# Guilt and shame in middle childhood:

# Relationships with empathic responsiveness

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## Abstract

In previous research, children's empathy was positively related to guilt and unrelated to shame. In the present study, it was predicted that guilt and empathy would have a curvilinear relationship while shame and empathy were expected to be inversely related.

One-hundred and fifteen children participated: 24 8-9 year old boys, 24 8-9 year old girls, 38 11-12 year old boys, and 25 11-12 year old girls. Children completed the Test of Self-Conscious Affect-Children's version (Tangney, Wagner, Burggraf, Gramzow, & Fletcher, 1990), and the Empathy Continuum (Strayer, 1993).

Present results were found to be conditional upon children's age and sex. Guilt and empathy were negatively related in younger boys; in all other groups guilt and empathy were positively related. Shame and empathy were negatively related in younger girls, and positively related in all other groups. Present results suggest that guilt and shame undergo notable change in middle childhood.




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## Introduction

→ Guilt and shame operate at different levels of self-evaluation (Lewis, 1971; Tangney, 1995):

- GUILT focuses on one's ACTIONS
- SHAME focuses on the SELF

→ This differential foci underlies proposed differences in how guilt and shame relate to empathy:

- guilt allows for a greater other-oriented, empathic stance
- shame engenders intense self- focus which should interfere with empathy

→ Research with children (Tangney, Burggraf, Wagner, Gramzow, & Fletcher, 1991):

- guilt showed positive relationships with other-oriented empathy
- shame appeared unrelated to children's empathy

## Hypotheses

1) Children's guilt scores were predicted to show a curvilinear relationship to empathy scores:

- children with moderate guilt scores should show higher empathy scores
- children with extreme guilt scores (either high or low) should show lower empathy scores

2) Children's shame scores were predicted to show an inverse, linear relationship with scores on a measure of empathic responsiveness.

3) Examination of age and gender effects were exploratory.

## Method

Subjects:

- 24 8-9 year old boys (M=107.1 months)
- 24 8-9 year old girls (M=107.1 months)
- 38 11-12 year old boys (M=145.9 months)
- 25 11-12 year old girls (M=141.9 months)

Measures:

1) The Test of Self-Conscious Affect - Children's Version (Tangney, Wagner, Burggraf, Gramzow, & Fletcher, 1990)

2) The Empathy Continuum (Strayer, 1993)

## Results

Summary of Correlations between Guilt, Shame, and Empathy in the 4 Age X Gender Groups.

| | | GUILT | SHAME |
|---|---|---|---|
| EMPATHY | Young Boys | −.15 | +.24 |
| | Young Girls | +.18 | −.12 |
| | Older Boys | +.24 | +.11 |
| | Older Girls | +.25 | +.49* |

*p<.05

As can be seen above, the pattern of relationships among guilt, shame and empathy was different depending upon age and gender. Therefore, exploratory analyses, using principal components analytic procedures, were conducted in order to explore the relationships among the variables within Age X Gender groups. The results

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of these principal component analyses, illustrating the relationships among the variables in each of the Age X Gender groups, can seen in Figures One through to Four. Additionally, as has been seen in previous research using the TOSCA-C, guilt and shame scores showed significant, positive correlations overall, and within Age (younger, older) and Gender (boys, girls) groups.

**Figure 1: Principal component loadings of Guilt, Shame, and Empathy for Younger Boys.**

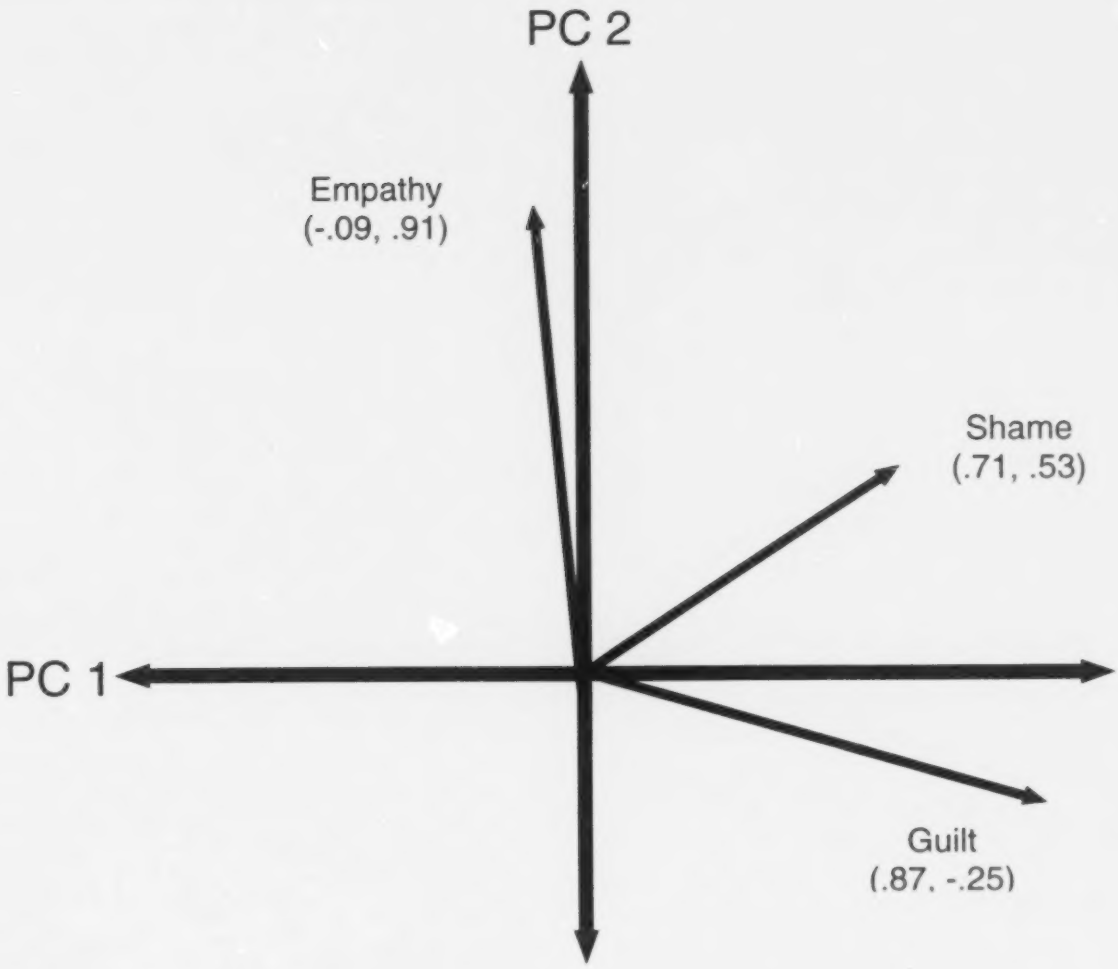

**Figure 2: Principal component loadings of Guilt, Shame, and Empathy for Younger Girls.**

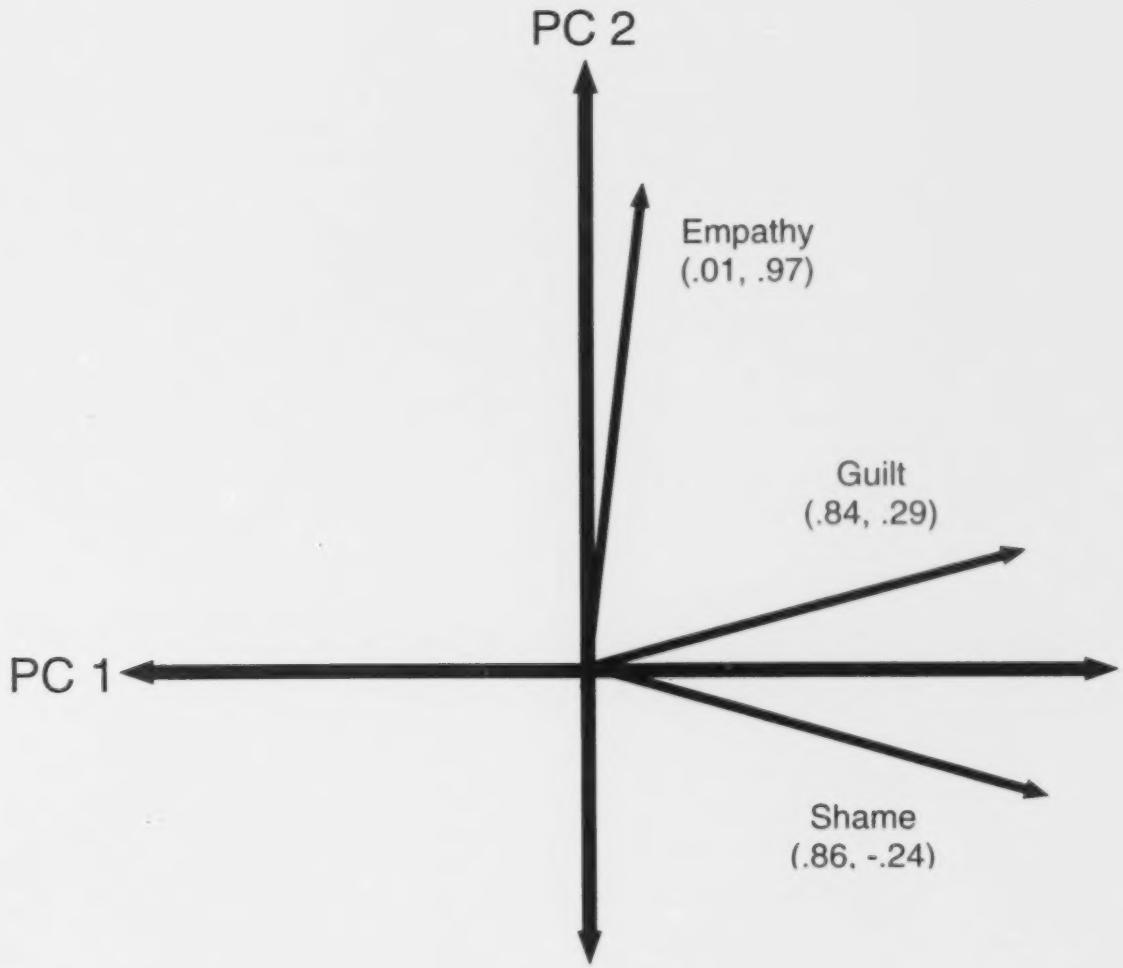

**Figure 3: Principal component loadings of Guilt, Shame, and Empathy for Older Boys.**

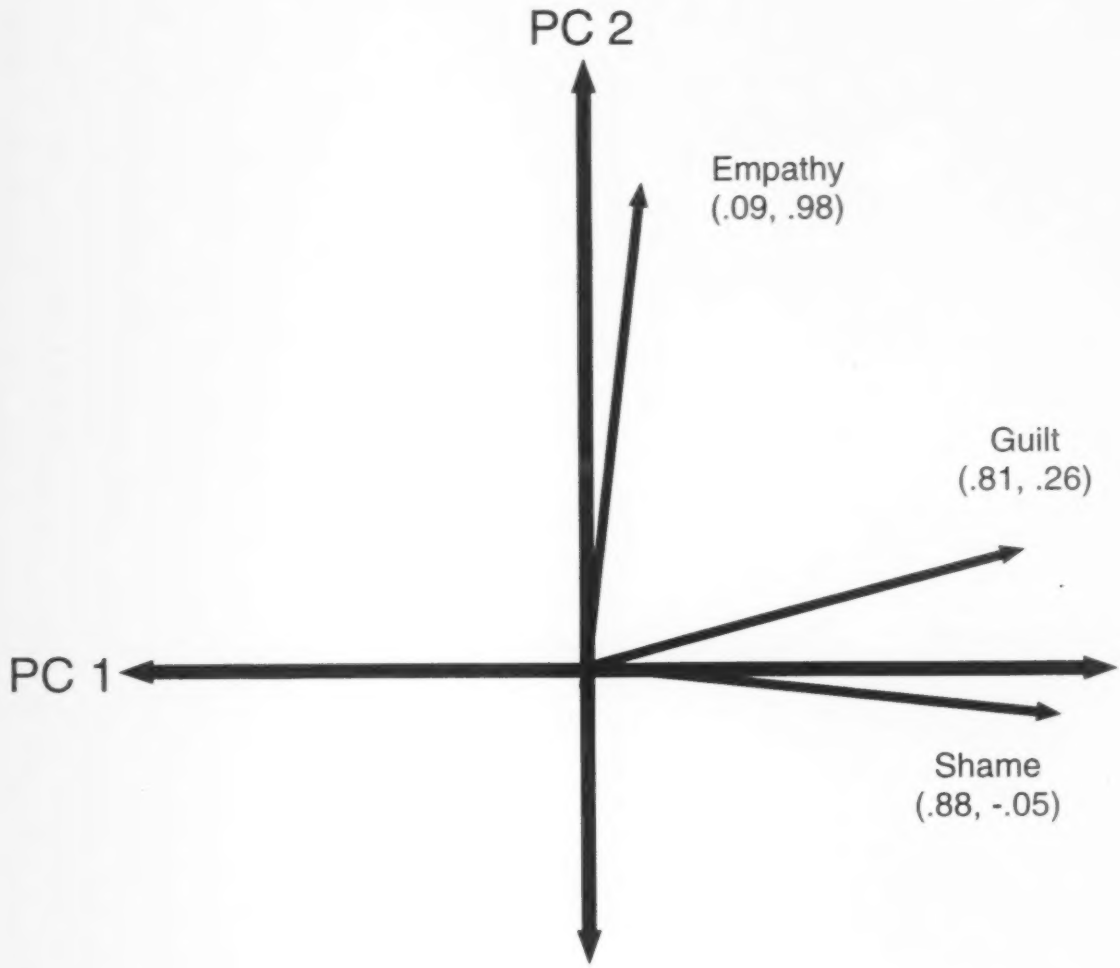


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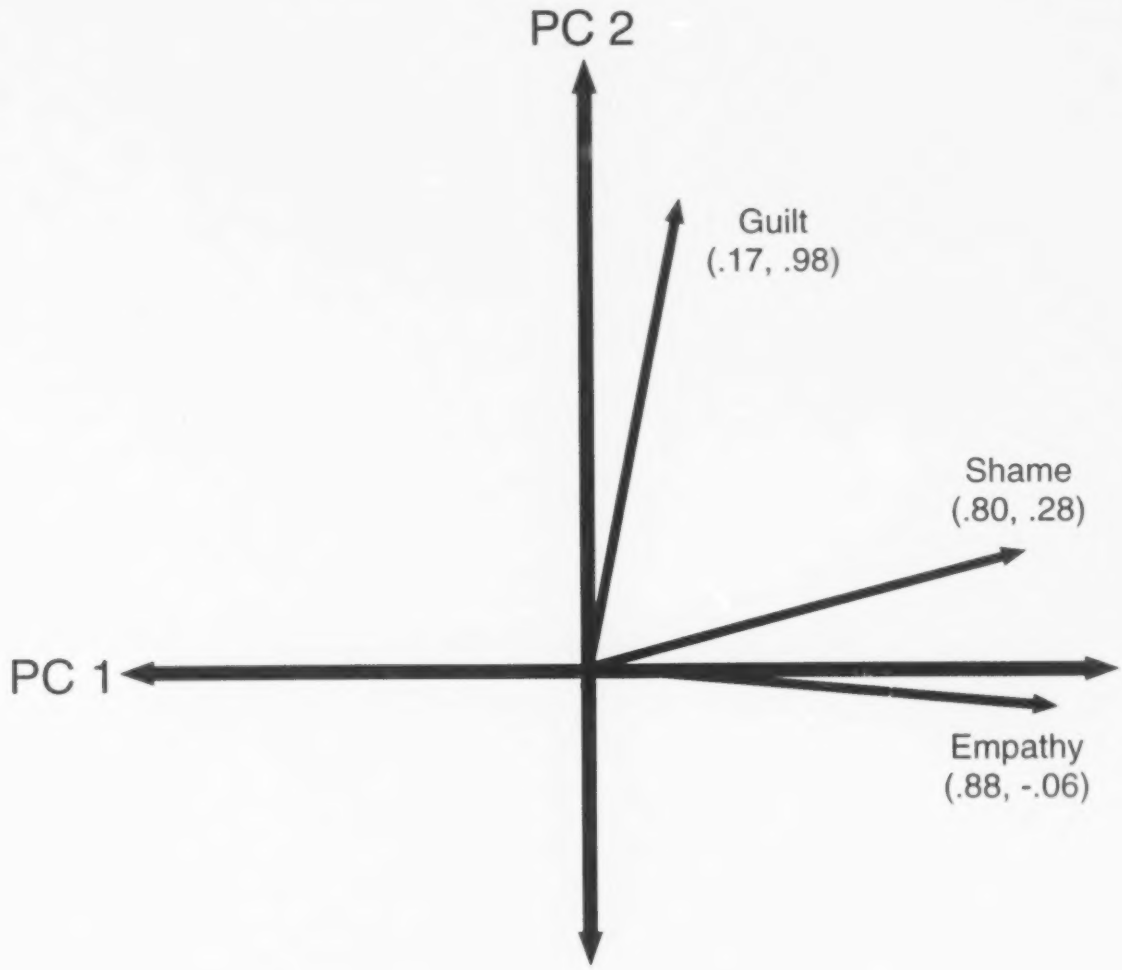
**Figure 4: Principal component loadings of Guilt, Shame, and Empathy for Older Girls.**



## Conclusions

➔ The present results suggest that the relationships between guilt, shame and empathy are more complex than were originally hypothesized.

➔ The most notable result of the present study is the finding that the relationships of guilt and shame to empathy are conditional upon children's age and gender.

➔ Previous research has treated children between 8 and 12 as a homogeneous group. The present results suggest that this approach may mask important age and gender differences in guilt and shame during middle childhood.

## Future Directions

➔ Future research investigating guilt and shame in children should consider age and gender effects on the relationships between self-conscious emotions and other important developmental variables. Guilt and shame appear to have different functional roles depending on age and gender that will be important to clarify with future research.

➔ In the present study, the measures of guilt, shame and empathy differed in their presentation format: the TOSCA-C is a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, whereas the Empathy Continuum is a quasi-naturalistic interview measure. Future research could investigate whether this difference in format may have important implications for observed relationships between guilt, shame and empathy.

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